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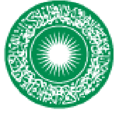

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Envisioning an African Child Development Field

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CHILD DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

Envisioning an African Child Development Field

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ABSTRACT—*Institutionalization of an African child development field is a necessary aspect of strategies for strengthening the continent's contributions to a global knowledge base. A disciplinary structure advances inquiry as it facilitates professionalization and provides space to formulate the canons and conventions that will guide knowledge production and the preparation and socialization of future researchers. Using the term* disciplinary development *to denote the process of bringing such a field about, this article outlines a pathway to disciplinary development, emphasizing important lessons that must be learned from (a) internal challenges to knowledge production in African universities, (b) Euro-American psychology's disciplinary development history, and (c) the movement to institutionalize psychology in non-Western countries. The issues addressed have relevance to other non-Western societies.*

KEYWORDS—*cultural contexts; disciplinary development; African child development field; global developmental science; paradigmatic and methodological issues*

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In the late 1920s, Edward Sapir, an anthropological linguist and pioneer advocate for interdisciplinarity among anthropology, psychology, and linguistics, affirmed that "the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels" (Sapir, 1929, cited in Shweder, 1991, p. 362). Far from ignoring commonalities in the human experience across cultures, Sapir's observation reminds us that cross-cultural variability in the conceptions and conventions that shape human behavior limits the generalizability of knowledge from one culture to another. Notwithstanding the long-standing exhortation for anthropological researchers entering other societies to be cognizant of cultural differences, psychological research in non-Western societies emerged within a Western "transplant" orientation and has proceeded largely as if cultural differences among societies are not significant.

The emergence of cross-cultural psychology signaled hope that culture would be "drawn" into general psychology's scientific program and thus open the discipline up to other cultural conceptions and help expand the nexus of psychological knowledge. Cross-cultural psychology was soon to be criticized on the grounds that its preoccupation with attaining a level of methodological sophistication acceptable to scientific psychology had led it to project culture as a qualifying variable, paying insufficient attention to cultural processes underlying differences in behavior across cultures (Cole, 1996; Miller, 1997; Price-Williams, 1980; Shweder, 1991). Cultural psychology—the much heralded "second psychology" that was to put culture back into psychological research more substantively—is seen as charting an uncertain trajectory of maturation (Ratner, 2008; Valsiner, 2009a, 2009b). Even so, in its various manifestations—for example, as a subdiscipline supplementing the experimental focus of traditional psychology with "a theoretically informed applied psychology that is sensitive to the complex historical-cultural locations of psychological processes" (Greenwood, 1999, p. 506), or as a methodologically pluralistic field (Cohen, 2007) in transition—it has inspired important theoretical and empirical contributions in ecological, sociocultural, and cultural-historical approaches to the study of development (Cole, 1996; Greenfield, 1997a, 2009; Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Rogoff, 1990,

2003; Super & Harkness, 1986, 2002; Weisner, 2002). These contributions, along with influences from cross-cultural psychology, are helping to pave the way for research conducted through other cultural lenses to contribute to a global discipline.

Outside American psychology, the *indigenous psychologies* movement became the platform for Western-trained scholars from developing countries to advocate for a culturally appropriate psychology (Adair & Kagitcibasi, 1995; Azuma, 1984; Serpell, 1984a; Sinha, 1997). The movement was powered by at least two forces, one *reactive* and the other *generative.* The former, reflected in postcolonial critiques, underscored psychology's limited relevance to, and imperialist image in, non-Western countries. The *generative* force, on the other hand, found expression in efforts to conceptualize and fashion the form and content of indigenous psychologies. Such "generative" work has proceeded in diverse intellectual directions (Kagitcibasi, 1996, 2000, 2002; Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006). In Africa, it is manifested in empirical work on indigenous conceptions of intelligence (e.g., Kathuria & Serpell, 1998; Serpell & Jere-Folotiya, 2008), in philosophical analysis and theory-building on indigenous understandings of development (e.g., Nsamenang, 1992, 2004, 2006), in contributions to dialogue on disciplinary development (e.g., Mpofu, 2002; Nsamenang, 1995; Serpell, 1984a), and in advocacy for contextually relevant developmental services (e.g., Pence & Marfo, 2004, 2008; Pence & Nsamenang, 2008).

Notwithstanding these trends, research by resident native African scholars remains limited (see Super, Harkness, Barry, & Zeitlin, this issue, for a review of expatriate research), and no clear disciplinary framework exists to advance inquiry or contemplate the preparation of future researchers. This article explores a pathway to an African child development field grounded in local contexts but simultaneously open to knowledge systems from other cultures. Scholars contemplating an African field have the benefit of a rearview mirror through which to examine and learn from (a) historical and institutional forces in Africa that impede the advancement of contextually relevant inquiry, (b) challenges inherent in prevailing reactions to Western knowledge, and (c) pitfalls in the disciplinary development of Euro-American psychology.

PAST AND PRESENT CONSTRAINTS: THE ROLE OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Many of Africa's challenges are frequently blamed on colonialism and Western imperialism. While historically justifiable, this narrative sometimes overstates the importance of the past, making realistic assessment of some contemporary problems difficult. One such problem is how poorly African universities have served to bridge the gulf between local realities and academic knowledge production. Figure 1 presents an illustrative characterization of the relationship between inquiry and culture. Euro-American research knowledge is a product of Western cultural conceptions of childhood and prevailing epistemological and methodological traditions. Privileged traditions within that knowledge base reflect the values of dominant groups within the culture. Thus, White middle-class ethnotheories and values about childrearing drive the conceptions of childhood that inform research (Figure 1, left pane). Part of the African challenge is the disjuncture (missing links in Figure 1) between the continent's own *culture-level knowledge traditions and values* and the

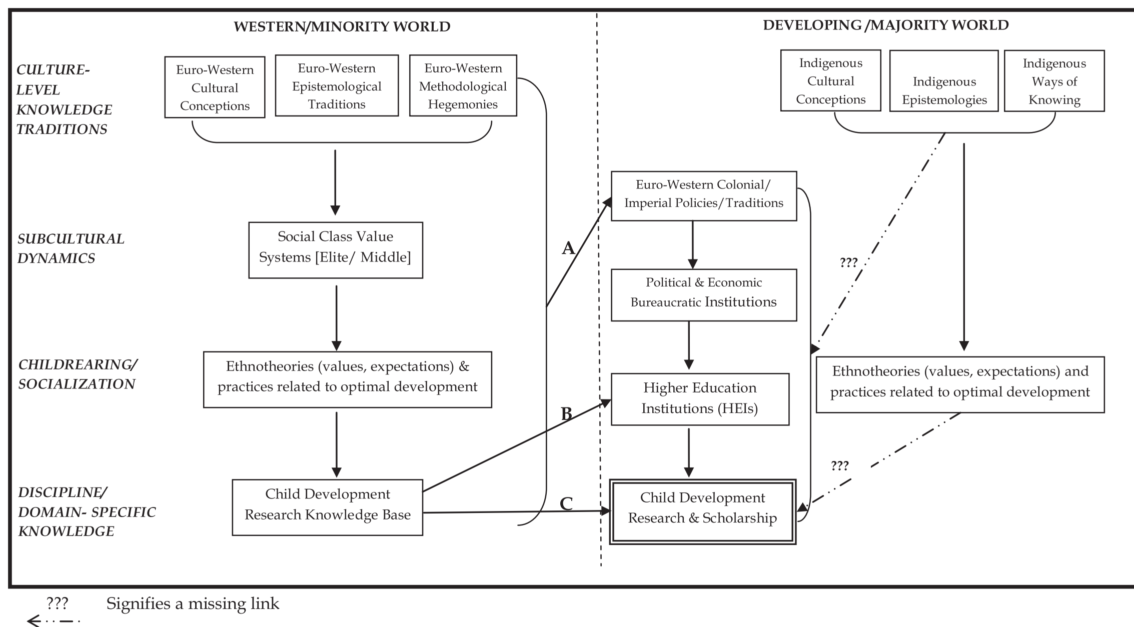

Figure 1. **Past and contemporary influences on child development research and scholarship in Africa.**

conceptions that drive inquiry. In the place of local traditions, ethnotheories, and ecological realities, Western influences have driven developmental research on the continent. Figure 1 (right pane) illustrates three such exogenous influences (links A, B, and C), two of which, I argue, are very contemporary and thus at best only distally grounded in colonial-era policies.

Treating the left pane of Figure 1 as a rough approximation of the culture–inquiry connection in the Euro-American context, link A depicts colonialism's influence and the associated traditions providing the foundational edifice for Africa's sociopolitical institutions. Some of the traditions driving research in Africa today stem from colonial-era legacies, including the inherited European-style tertiary education system. Long after colonial rule, and decades into independent educational planning, research education continues to be under the dominant influence of Euro-American institutions.

Link B depicts a less direct colonial influence, entailing factors at the intersection of development aid, international bilateral cooperation, and academic free-lancing. Research within Africa's universities is shaped significantly by extensive reliance on expatriate expertise from all forms of arrangements and by overdependence on foreign textbooks and curricular content. As necessary as they have been to the sustainability of African universities, expatriate scholars and foreign textbooks are also conveyors of idea systems that might have limited relevance in Africa. There are of course exceptions to this observation; while expatriate faculty may bring their own biases to Africa, some are even more sensitive to matters of contextual fit than are local scholars.

Finally, link C highlights the dominant approach to the preparation of future researchers. This is perhaps the most intriguing of the three influences. Even as Africanists complain about the debilitating effects that Eurocentrism has had on the continent's cultural traditions and institutions, African nations continue to send large numbers of their future academics for advanced graduate education in European and American universities. As costs have increased—and as overseas training exacerbates the brain drain—there has been a trend toward bilateral arrangements with partner universities in Europe and North America. These programs permit African scholars to complete some of their degree requirements through distance learning or short-term residency abroad. Full-time overseas study and partnership programs have one thing in common, however. In both cases, African scholars receive their research education through curricula established to prepare scholars primarily for the provider nation. Thus, type *C* influence results in large numbers of Africa's scholars being trained in settings and through curricula that are unlikely to feature the unique needs of their own societies in any appreciable way. The *emersion* model of full-time overseas research education may indeed increase the likelihood that the research programs of returning scholars would be less responsive to local realities (Adair & Kagitcibasi, 1995; Serpell, 2007).

The influences depicted in Figure 1 suggest that advanced research education may not be appropriately orienting African scholars for creative research on locally important issues. This calls for a rethinking of graduate education and a shift in the higher education institutional culture. With conceptions of excellence so closely entwined in Euro-American academic traditions, African universities need to strengthen their determination to project local relevance as an explicit institutional mission. This shift should, in turn, translate into personnel development policies and institutional practices that socialize future faculty to approach advanced graduate education, at home or abroad, not as an exercise in uncritical assimilation and transportation of ideas but as preparation to use acquired knowledge and competencies to solve local problems. These concerns are shared by many scholars who work with aspiring African academics in Euro-American institutions. Therefore, part of the solution lies in shaping bilateral arrangements to increase the probability that the curricula of these programs will be better aligned with the needs and demands of the contexts to which returning graduates will be applying their knowledge.

FRAMING THE FIELD

The preceding section addressed the institutional culture shift and capacity-building that must take place for African universities to advance locally relevant inquiry and buttress disciplinary development. This section turns to the task of framing the form and content of an African field in the larger context of the movement to domesticate fields of inquiry rooted within Euro-American traditions. Drawing on the discourse on indigenous psychologies, I offer one perspective on disciplinary development.

At the height of the indigenous psychologies movement, exhortations for Western psychology to open up to other cultural conceptions of reality soon triggered a debate over the form that the discipline should take in non-Western societies. Is it possible to broaden Euro-American theories and approaches to accommodate indigenous perspectives, or would consideration of such perspectives require the development of concepts and tools that may be so idiosyncratic to local cultural realities as to render cross-context comparisons and generalizations meaningless (see Miller & Chen, 2000)?

In framing this tension, Kagitcibasi (2000) distinguished between an *indigenous orientation* to psychology and the *indigenization* of psychology. She saw the first approach as embracing the idea of "one psychology which benefits from indigenous knowledge" (p. 7). Indigenization, on the other hand, requires the development of a psychology for each culture based on each culture's construal of psychological phenomena. Thus, while an *indigenous orientation* contributes to a *unified* discipline and allows for generalization and cross-cultural comparisons, *indigenization* presumably anticipates a multiplicity of psychologies producing "an unwieldy and basically incomparable body of knowledge" (Kagitcibasi, 2000, p. 7) in which universals are perhaps irrelevant.

The position I take in this article is that it is possible to think about these two visions in a way that removes the appearance of a tension. The critical question may not be whether "specific cultural mentalities" are "so unique that each cultural group needs its own psychology" (Gielen, 2000, p. 37). Rather, it may be whether we can conceive of a truly global discipline in which pursuit of uniquely culture-specific understandings is not antithetical to pursuit of understandings with cross-cultural generality. What is needed, therefore, is a discipline as welcoming to scholarship focusing exclusively on "indigenous" constructs within specific cultures as it is to scholarship guided by "generalist" orientations or universal principles.

Extrapolation of this unified vision to the central concern of this article points to an inclusive and open pathway to disciplinary development, one that recognizes diversity of orientations and visions as a *sine qua non* to the development of a meaningful and healthy intellectual culture. In practical terms, an African child development field would have a place for different forms of inquiry. It should be appropriate for scholars with a relatively more global view of developmental research to focus their inquiry on how local, culturally inspired understandings of developmental phenomena contribute to a global knowledge base with high relevance for Africa. It is similarly appropriate for scholars committed to the exploration of indigenous content as an important end in itself to dedicate their efforts to such inquiry. Ideally, the field should grow in the direction of integration such that questions on universal and culture-specific issues can be addressed within singular lines of inquiry.

What is proposed, then, is an African field conceived, not as a culturally insulated enterprise cocooned in its own traditions and designed exclusively to address questions of local relevance but as a field that is mindful enough of the interconnectedness of the human condition across cultures to be able to benefit from and contribute to other understandings. It should be informed by an orientation that accentuates local relevance and pays priority attention to mechanisms for building a knowledge base on indigenous conceptions of childhood. After all, one way for an African field to contribute to a global knowledge base is in showing how research conducted across cultures on the continent helps to distinguish uniquely local and culture-bound developmental processes from those that are universal but expressed differently in particular cultural contexts. In a later section, examples of possible lines of inquiry reflecting the diverse foci suggested here are provided.

Paradigmatic and Methodological Issues

Epistemological and methodological issues are at the heart of disciplined inquiry. Some of the most incisive critiques of Western psychology have been directed at the discipline's extreme positivist heritage. Intriguingly, the vision for the new discipline, toward the end of the 19th century, was not one of a monolithic science. Even Wilhelm Wundt, psychology's founding father who is sometimes blamed for laying the foundations for a largely experimental discipline, did not consider experimentation as the only method for the discipline (Giorgi, 1970). Wundt also advocated for *Volkerpsychologie* (folk psychology). He viewed experimental psychology as best suited to the study of the mental life of individuals and *Volkerpsychologie* as appropriate for studying the cultural development of higher mental processes (Greenwood, 1999; Shamdasani, 2003). Importantly, Wundt appears to have conceived of psychology as a discipline through which the causal-experimental methods of the natural sciences could be integrated with the historical-cultural methods of the human sciences for a more meaningful study of psychological phenomena (Greenwood, 1999).

Thus, but for the repudiation of this "synthetic" view of psychology by Wundt's own American students (Greenwood, 1999) and, perhaps more pivotally, the success of Watson's behaviorist revolution, Euro-American psychology could have emerged as a much broader discipline open to the methodological canons of the natural as well as the human sciences. Under behaviorism, pragmatic hegemonic thought triumphed over epistemological and methodological pluralism, sending psychology down a narrow path for close to half a century.

This historical assessment is relevant because it highlights the dangers of building a new field on any form of hegemony—cultural, epistemological, or methodological. More important, there are indications from the indigenous psychologies discourse that some of the pitfalls of American psychology's disciplinary development could be repeated in other parts of the world. As Adair (1999) notes, researchers advocating for culture-specific inquiry in developing countries have tended to espouse the view that "holistic, qualitative, and phenomenological" methods are more compatible with, and thus more appropriate for, non-Western cultures (p. 404). This viewpoint may be further reinforced for scholars who see cultural psychology's association with an interpretive/qualitative framework in some formulations of the field (e.g., Ratner, 2008; Ratner & Hui, 2003; Shweder, 1991) as a repudiation of quantitative methods. However, it is important to note, for example, that Cole's (1996) framing of cultural psychology embraces interpretive as well as causal-experimental methodologies, and the field has evolved in a methodologically diverse direction over the years (Cohen, 2007). Greenfield's (1997a, 2009) combined use of descriptive-qualitative analysis and structural equation modeling is illustrative of cultural psychology's increasing methodological hybridization. Above all, even within general psychology, experimental quantitative techniques are increasingly being used in combination with qualitative ones (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). In short, an emergent African child development field should be open to different paradigmatic and methodological approaches drawn from multiple disciplines.

Other Problematic Legacies

Non-Western critiques of psychology often address the limited relevance of American research for non-Western settings.

Frequently overlooked is its limited generalizability even within the American cultural mosaic. Knowledge generated predominantly through studies of White, middle-class samples from populations around major research centers may provide limited answers to problems within other subpopulations. Tulkin and Konner's (1976) classic assessment of ethnocentrism in developmental research provides important lessons on the handling of diversity. Their analysis of comparative parent–child interaction research revealed that when researchers found differences in the behaviors of American parents and parents from other industrialized nations, they consistently explained the differences in terms of cultural variations in the parents' conceptions of childrearing. However, when differences were observed between middle-class parents and lower income or ethnic minority parents within the United States, the latter's behaviors were interpreted as problematic and needing intervention. Researchers seemed "reasonably tolerant of child-rearing practices observed in cultures of other industrialized societies which would be devalued if reported in a minority group in the United States" (Tulkin & Konner, 1976, p. 137). Exemplifying *differential cultural relativism* (Marfo & Boothby, 1997), this comparative bias illustrates the problem of framing optimal developmental conditions within a culturally heterogeneous society around White middle-class values and practices and interpreting deviations "not as alternative pathways for normal development but as conditions of deficit or deprivation" (LeVine, 1989, p. 54).

Differential cultural relativism and the imputation of deficiency from difference are quite rampant in American intervention research (Marfo & Boothby, 1997; Marfo, Dedrick, & Barbour, 1998) and possibly stem from *evolutionist* perspectives on diversity. According to Shweder (1991), evolutionists approach difference from a hierarchical perspective, one in which ideas, belief systems, and practices other than one's own are viewed as "really incipient and less adequate" (p. 114). Interventions are thus designed to move the incipient *up* to the level of a normative standard erected on the basis of one worldview.

These are not inherently Euro-American problems. Wherever sociocultural hierarchies exist, the danger of differential cultural relativism and cultural imposition can be real. Africa is a huge continent with numerous countries, each with multiple subcultures rooted in centuries of traditions shaped, to varying degrees, by indigenously African, Islamic, and Western institutions (Nsamenang, 1992). So-called modernization influences, including schooling and urbanization, are uneven even within individual nations. This complex diversity has profound ramifications for framing a field and for generating and applying research. This challenge is exacerbated when the elite class, to which researchers are likely to belong, also happens to be part of "dominant" subgroups within given societies. The prospect that the conceptions of childhood and optimal development within some cultures would be privileged over others is very real. Advancing a field that is free of these problems is an arduous task, but research education that anticipates and sensitizes scholars to these problems could make a difference.

NEEDED INQUIRY: ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

Africa offers fertile ground for multidisciplinary, methodologically pluralistic inquiry in which indigenous as well as changing conceptions of child development inform theoretical and applied questions with local and global significance. In this final section, three illustrative examples of relevant inquiry are presented.

Inquiry Into Indigenous Conceptions

There is a dearth of knowledge from theoretical analyses of cultural constructs regarding indigenous conceptions and expectations about child development. Nsamenang (1992, 2006) has begun to provide aspects of this important knowledge. Grounding understandings about development within indigenous conceptions of the human life cycle, Nsamenang has proposed stages in the development of social selfhood with corresponding developmental tasks that are yet to be validated empirically. The stages include newborn, presocial, social novice, social entrée, social intern, adulthood, and old age. Setting aside the issue of generalizability, Nsamenang's work on the Nso of Cameroon is illustrative of needed "indigenous" inquiry on subcultures across the continent. Foundational work of this nature is necessary in its own right but it also sets the stage for normative and idiographic inquiry regarding the mechanisms of developmental change. It is also pivotal to addressing applied questions, such as whether and/or how indigenous socialization processes prepare children adequately for "modern" institutions like schooling.

Inquiry on Prototypically African Issues

Episodic sibling caregiving and prolonged childrearing by older siblings are common forms of socialization across Africa, yet we know very little about their processes and outcomes across African subcultures. This is a subject on which research in Africa can add significantly to a global knowledge base. Weisner's cross-cultural work on socially distributed "parenting" (e.g., Weisner, 1989a, 1997; Weisner & Gallimore, 1977) and his Kenyan research on sibling caretaking (e.g., Weisner, 1987, 1989b) provide an important foundation for future research. What elements of socialization prepare children to provide caregiving to younger siblings? What are the cultural markers for maturation toward sibling caregiving? What differences exist in the ethnotheories and caregiving behaviors of parenting adults and care-providing siblings? Are there short- or long-term differences in developmental outcomes for parent- or adult-reared children versus sibling-reared children, and what dynamics account for such differences? Inquiry addressing these questions should expand our knowledge of socialization beyond what is known from the Western parent–child socialization model.

Validating Relevant Theories With Euro-American Origins

Relevance is a central theme in critiques of psychological research in Africa. As Nsamenang (1992) notes, the focus of research "has almost exclusively been on issues that are more pertinent to Western social realities than to the harsh realities of life in African communities" (p. 192). As an example of inquiry addressing pressing African issues, consider the implications of rapid social change for children's development. While Africa is one of the least urbanized regions of the world, it has the highest rate of urbanization globally (Clancy, 2008; UN Population Fund, 2007) and is projected to be only 20 years away from reaching the tipping point at which more people will live in urban areas than in rural areas (UN Human Settlement Program, 2010). Social change comes with corresponding changes not only in the goals and processes of socialization but also in how children develop, learn, and respond to their transforming world (Marfo & Biersteker, 2011). How is urbanization altering socialization goals and practices in hitherto traditional settings? As the broader ecology of development undergoes restructuring, what is the nature of the resultant changes in trajectories of development? What continuities and discontinuities are observable between socialization in school versus community settings? How are these related to developmental differences across groups of children with varying exposure to schooling? And what are the implications for education design? These questions have high contemporary relevance and should prime programmatic research aimed at generating theory-informing data on trajectories of developmental change across age levels, social groups, and subcultural contexts.

These questions also present opportunities for researchers to test exogenous theories linking social change to changes in developmental trajectories. For example, Greenfield (2009) posits two sociodemographic complexes as prototypical environments with distinct cultural pathways through universal development: rural or folk community versus urban society. As a society shifts from a relatively traditional rural, subsistence economy to an urban, commercialized one, corresponding shifts occur in trajectories of cognitive development. Empirical support for this proposition includes evidence that adolescents in more commercial and technological family environments demonstrated greater abstraction in visual representation and cognitive style (see Greenfield, 2009).

Tests of such theories must be guided by research on the ecological validity of psychological instruments. Greenfield (1997b) has addressed the cultural constraints of ability tests generally, and Serpell (1979, 1984b) has demonstrated in the African context the danger of drawing invalid conclusions when tasks used to assess cognitive skills are not ecologically appropriate relative to the prior experiences of research participants. Thus, validation work on theories such as Greenfield's also requires the development and validation of ecologically appropriate tasks that measure similar underlying processes across contexts under comparison.

CONCLUSION

An authentically global child development field must not be the handmaiden of any one knowledge tradition within a single culture. It should be the product of multiple traditions across societies, bringing diverse paradigmatic perspectives to the complex task of forging inquiry in which consideration of the culturally situated nature of human functioning is the rule rather than the exception. Premised on the perspective that non-Western societies have important contributions to make to the evolution of such a global field, this article has presented one vision for institutionalizing child development research in Africa and has made a case for an African field that responds to local realities and contributes simultaneously to a global knowledge base. Disciplines do not develop by design, but I hope an emergent African field guided by some of the cautions and lessons highlighted in this article will better position researchers to approach the study of children as *natural* and *cultural* beings best understood in their local contexts.

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